

## Freedom of the Press

The media environment in Djibouti, one of the most restrictive in Africa, worsened slightly in 2013 due to a spate of arrests and detentions of journalists. Djibouti's laws and constitution provide for freedoms of speech and of the press, but in practice the government imposes serious curbs on independent media. The penal code and the 1992 Freedom of Communication Law provide for criminal penalties for media offenses, including libel and distributing false information. In May 2013, Maydaneh Abdallah Okieh, a journalist and web technician for the opposition *La Voix de Djibouti* radio station and website, was sentenced to a 45-day prison term and a fine for posting photographic evidence of police brutality on Facebook. Opposition activist and former journalist Daher Ahmed Farah was imprisoned in July 2 for more than a month for allegedly failing to comply with a judicial order to pay hundreds of thousands of Djibouti francs in fines and damages.

Djibouti does not have a law guaranteeing access to public information. The Freedom of Communication Law imposes the requirement that anyone wishing to establish a privately owned media outlet must be a Djiboutian citizen and meet a minimum age requirement. The National Communication Commission, charged with issuing private radio and television broadcasting licenses, accepted its first application in 2012, though it remained pending at year's end.

The official media, which account for almost all of the country's outlets, do not criticize the government and practice widespread self-censorship. Journalists generally avoid covering sensitive issues, including human rights, the army, the rebel Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy (FRUD), and relations with Ethiopia. The U.S. military presence in Djibouti creates additional pressures to self-censor, as journalists are discouraged from reporting on soldiers' activities. Although there are no reports of the government limiting access to the internet, social media are closely monitored for plans of demonstrations or criticism of the government. The Association for Respect of Human Rights in Djibouti and *La Voix de Djibouti* claim that their sites—the main sources for independent views in the country—are regularly blocked.

Journalists are subject to detention without charge, intimidation, and violence, which further contributes to self-censorship. In 2013, the government used repeated arrests and imprisonments to silence journalists affiliated with *La Voix de Djibouti*. A string of arrests of *La Voix* journalists in December 2013 alarmed media freedom advocates. Mohamed Ibrahim Waiss was arrested on December 12 for covering a protest. He was released on bail a week later; his trial was scheduled to take place in 2014. Moustapha Abdourahman Houssein and Sahal Elmi Talan were arrested on December 14 for covering street vendor evictions; they were released after two days, but Houssein was rearrested when he returned to the police station to collect his belongings. Journalist and opposition party member Farah Abadid Hildid was arrested and released on December 7.

The domestic media sector is very limited. Because of high poverty levels, radio is the most popular news medium. The government owns the principal newspaper, *La Nation*, as well as Radio-Television Djibouti, which operates the national radio and television stations. Community radio, which has gained great popularity across Africa, is nonexistent, and Djibouti is one of the few countries on the continent without any independent or privately owned newspapers. Djiboutian law technically permits all registered political parties to publish a newspaper. Only one newsletter run by an opposition party, the National Democratic

Party (PND), still publishes regularly, although other opposition groups and civil society activists are able to distribute written materials that are critical of the government. Printing facilities for mass media are government owned, making it difficult to print criticism of the government for wide circulation.

There are no private radio or television stations in the country, though foreign radio broadcasts are available from the British Broadcasting Corporation, Voice of America, and Radio France Internationale, offering alternative sources of information to the public. *La Voix de Djibouti* started broadcasting in 2010 as a clandestine independent radio station operating from abroad. Its website cannot be accessed within the country. Nearly 10 percent of the population was able to access the internet in 2013. The only internet service provider is owned by the government. State-owned Djibouti Telecom launched 3G mobile service, which went live in the country in January 2013, but the service remains prohibitively expensive for most inhabitants.

## **2014 Scores**

### **Press Status**

Not Free

### **Press Freedom Score**

**(0 = best, 100 = worst)**

75

### **Legal Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

24

### **Political Environment**

**(0 = best, 40 = worst)**

28

### **Economic Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

23